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## THE COLLEGE LITERARY SOCIETY.

ONE of the significant things in college education of the last twenty-five years has been the comparatively steady and general decline in the value of the literary society. Any one who entered college (say) in the early eighties could still hear the reverberating echoes of superlative efforts in college oratory and much talk of a golden age of literary society efficiency. Even yet, when the older alumni of Southern institutions come together at commencement, they sadly lament a something gone out of the platform exhibitions, and in reminiscent mood recall a time when college students "could speak," as they say. They visit their old societies and, in the very act of recounting former glories, illustrate the oratorical qualities that made the other years so splendid in speaking achievement. One of them, whose name is still one to charm with in tradition, came to me much out of heart and dissatisfied with the debate of the Juniors and the speeches of the Seniors. In a tone that implied that the bottom had dropped out of all things, he said: "Your boys write better English, discuss more up-to-date subjects than we used to; but they simply can't *speak*." "What do you mean by that?" I inquired. "Why," continued he, "they don't know how to make gestures, they don't feel what they say, and they have no voices."

Here, then, was a student of the old school, by way of criticism of the new, asserting the aims and ideals of the literary society of former days, and at the same time suggesting an essential difference in present-day aims and ideals. Gesture, feeling, voice, these made the basis of the consummate product of literary society work in the Southern college both before and immediately following the war. At their best, these elements brought a charm of stately attitudinizing, graceful action, moving and winning appeal to the emotions, and range and power of vocal expression; at their worst,

affected extravagance, brazen and clanging rhetoric, and the sound and fury that signifieth nothing. This baser expression of college oratory has, unfortunately I think, ruled in our conception of the general type of the older product of the college literary society, and has made it a mockery and a byword. But it should be steadily kept in mind that the literary societies formerly aimed to develop the orator, and that the orator was the hero of the campus and the unfailing wonder of admiring audiences. And this supreme position of the orator and the fame he won were sufficient to furnish a vital atmosphere for the abounding life of that which produced him, the literary society.

However, changed conditions both without and within the college campus have been potent enough to take the orator from his lofty pedestal as a college hero and furnish other social and scholastic ideals, which have brought about his virtual undoing, and hence an almost fatal enfeebling of that within which he moved and had his being, the literary society. Great changes have come in the social ideals that appeal to young men of intellectual aspirations. Formerly the law and politics were the supreme fields that invited them, and these fields were the arena for the display of the power and influence of the orator. It should be remembered, too, that in no other part of the world did the mere speaker get so many glittering rewards, and no people were more sensitive to the charm of voice, emotional appeal, and graceful action than the people of the South. Every State, every district, every community, every crossroads had more than one man whom the people heard with eager gladness, and upon whom they were willing to confer honors and offices of trust for his much speaking. These outside influences naturally beat into the retirement of classic shades, to use an old-fashioned phrase, and furnished ideals potent enough to make the college literary society seem the most practical part of the college course. Hence it flourished as the training ground of the rhetorical, declamatory debater and speaker, and he became in general estimation the consummate flower of college life. But a rather swift change

has come in social ideals, and with it it has grown more and more evident that the orator has had his day. Indeed, it does not require much insight to see that the orator as such has become pretty generally distrusted, and the demand is for plain, simple, straightforward utterance, unadorned with the older graces of diction and manner. In the new industrial revolution and economic adjustment men have busied themselves with what they are pleased to call practical affairs, and the law and politics have not wholly monopolized men of talent and ambition as they once did. These conditions, moreover, do not call for emotion and imagination as did the dramatic conditions of the older days. They ask of the speaker if he really has anything to say—information, instruction, and the dry, matter-of-fact details that concern the building of factories and the developing of mines. They are thus of such a nature as to create a kind of suspicion, if not contempt, for the man of words, however fine the words may be.

These influences have been strongly reënforced by other influences within the campus, which have helped not only to diminish the power of the college speaker but also to affect generally the place and work of the literary society. The first is to be found in the steady increase of academic requirements. More work and, I believe, a better kind of work is now demanded of students, so that they simply have not the time they once had to give to the literary society. The result is that men of the finer sort devote themselves almost wholly to meeting scholastic requirements, and the men of the other sort either express their activity in other ways or else are not strong enough to make the societies at all what they should be. The more deeply one looks into the amount of work which each department requires and expects of the rather immature students that come to us, the more one wonders that so many manage to survive and in some way accomplish it. It really at times seems all but a slaughter of the innocents. At any rate, under the present system—and I do not say it is bad—literary society work must inevitably be a sort of addendum to the regular college course,

and to give it anything like the time necessary to make it seem worth the doing is to rob where, if it be not a crime, it is at least to put in danger class standing. Men have neither the time nor the opportunity seriously to prepare themselves for their society duties. Hence it is not hard to understand why these societies become places for superficial fluency, for trivial mouthing under the name of speaking, for parliamentary quibbling, and cheap college politics. Such as this requires no preparation, and indeed may be taken as a kind of recreation. The faculty may make appeals, if they will, for a better sort of work, may point out the unusually important benefits of training the societies profess to offer; but with all departments crowding the students and devouring time, day in and day out, it is expecting too much of them that they should give such attention to the societies as that they should flourish with even a shadow of their former glory. These new academic requirements have been strong, I should say, in helping to bring about the inevitable decadence of the literary society.

But to the mere matter of requirements must also be added those modifications of college methods and ideals due to the introduction of scientific courses, with the demands of the laboratory, and the full elective courses inviting very early to specialization. These laboratory hours must be met. In laboratory hours would be included also library hours. They take the time that formally might have been given to preparation for speaking and debate. But even deeper than this: science and its methods have subtly yet surely affected student ideals, and there is no class of persons more easily subdued to the color of certain exaggerated notions. Science and the scientific method applied to all subjects is a practical, everyday thing dealing with facts. It is thus apt to substitute in the student's thinking the importance of the doer of things over the sayer of things, and arouse his interest in matters wholly remote from the subjects that usually concern the speaker and debater. Imagination, emotion, decorative rhetoric, high-sounding generalities are just the elements that the laboratory and library

will have none of, and yet in them the active literary society worker is more than apt to luxuriate. So, then, it is not only a question of time that we have to deal with when we come to consider scientific studies and the scientific method in their effect upon the college literary society; it is a question of aims and ideals as well.

The introduction of elective courses has also had its share in furnishing influences unfavorable to an active interest in what the literary society stands for. Election leads necessarily to specialization, and to a narrowing, in the mind of the student, of what the college may mean. Now, whatever else may have characterized the old college, it stood for general culture; the new stands for special efficiency. The older type of student found his cultural life most active in the literary society; the new type of student thinks he finds his ambitions best satisfied in trying to know everything about a few things. The literary society is therefore apt to make only a feeble appeal to him on the side of general culture, even if he had time for it. If he thinks at all about the matter, he is likely to resist the natural tendency of the literary society to draw him away from his special line of work into broader and more general interests, interests that seem quite remote from what he has immediately in hand. There would be, for example, no inconsiderable number of students who would find it hard to get themselves concerned with the inveterate way most literary societies have of confining their topics of discussion almost wholly to political and social matters. Election, therefore, and the consequent narrowing of student interest and activity are influences which, to no small degree, limit and hamper the literary society, at least in comparison with what it formerly meant in college life.

In connection with these changes and modifications in the college courses affecting the literary societies, I think we should also consider the new type of college professor. The older type of college teacher was, in most cases, a man of general culture, and was almost always, if not himself skilled and gifted in the art of charming public utterance, at least

in full sympathy with it, both outside and inside the literary society. Indeed, formerly no college faculty was wanting in one or two men who perhaps really owed their positions not so much to their scholarship as to a winning charm of stately, classic oratory. Now, however, we have changed all that. The mere scholar has taken the place of the mere teacher with the adornments of scholarship. And I am not sure that we have wholly gained by the change. The new type of professor is inclined to be cabined, cribbed, and confined in the narrow house of his own department. In an unwavering devotion to a limited field he has found that the rewards of his profession come. Whatever his chair, therefore, he is likely to be a man of deep rather than broad knowledge and of a hard scientific method than the graces of social and intellectual culture. He has not only no charm of public address, but is openly willing to show a contempt for the whole business of public speaking. Now college students are keen and quick to get their notions of at least some things from their professors, especially if these professors happen to be strong men. The result is that the student does not care for that in which his professor shows not only inefficiency but also a manifest contempt. So we have here another element working against anything like a general and hearty appreciation of the value and importance of the literary society. Indeed, it is positively hostile to it.

But these modifications of the college course and the new type of professor that has come with them have emphasized thorough and exact scholarship in a way hardly dreamed of under older conditions. We have come therefore to see the scholar, in the matter of college ideals, set high above the orator and debater. The plodding crammer at worst and brilliant student at best have taken the place, at least in the eye of the faculty, of the speaker who onced walked, too frequently strutted, a veritable hero among his fellows. The truth is that the stress of college requirements, and the rewards that success in them bring, have so far appealed to men of talent that activity and a sort of efficiency in literary society work have been found to be characteristic of many

who neglect the routine of academic duties and demands. This has grown to be such an evil in some institutions that college honors have been taken from the hands of the literary societies in some cases, and in others a certain minimum of scholarship is demanded of all whom the societies choose to represent them on public occasions. This indicates a low ebb of society interest. A rather shiftless class of fellows are in the saddle, and institutions must protect themselves by refusing a semblance of approbation to them. But however necessary this may be, such measures show in no uncertain way that the new conditions demand that a student shall be first of all a scholar and only secondarily a speaker. This is, of course, as it should be; still it is a sign of that low estate to which literary societies have fallen, and a further sign that the scholar is the prime ideal of all the forces of college life.

This is from the standpoint of college faculties; but the student community has itself, in the last twenty years, set up its own visions of excellency and fame-bringing achievement, and these have aroused such a pitch of fervent student enthusiasm as none others have, not even the college orator in his palmy days. The long jumper and the high kicker, the pitcher and the shortstop, the center rush and the quarter back have come to their day of radiant glory. These are the bright, particular stars in the college firmament, and other lights are lesser in comparison. The scholar and the orator both sink into the shadow of the commonplace in the presence of the shining figure of the hero of the athletic field. To him all bow, and for him all things exist. The outside public, through the newspapers, has brought college athletics into the glare and noise of a fierce sensationalism. I saw a rather striking notice in a newspaper just a little while ago. It ran this way: "A. college is ready for opening next week. Football Coach Smith is already on the grounds, and the President will be in Monday." No humor was intended by this notice. It merely indicated what phase of the college opening the public would be especially interested in. The interest of the students gathers



about the same thing with all-absorbing, all-excluding intensity, and this athletic interest becomes the most abiding memory after they leave college. Now when the younger alumni come together, it is not to talk of the powerful speaking of A., but of the marvelous pitching of B. and the extraordinary "run" of C. down the field for a touch-down. Athletics, then, is the most vital thing in college life under present conditions, and the athletic ideal looms larger before the student mind than any other. He has before him, therefore, a vision of excellence other than intellectual and academic, as we understand that word. And so powerful is this influence that we may well ask what chance has the orator, or indeed even the scholar, in the atmosphere in which the athletic ideal thrives.

There is yet another thing which we shall have to reckon with in dealing with the literary society as it is, especially in comparison with what it has been, and that is a social matter. The time was when the society and its occasions represented the social activity of college life at its high tide. Their functions were the events of the year, looked forward to long before and talked of long after. The college shone in happy and radiant splendor at such times, and it seemed as if everything existed for, and led up to, such crowning occasions. Now, however, fraternity functions and the functions of other organizations more or less exclusive have come, if not to absorb social interest altogether, at least to divide it and so to dissipate it as to minimize the importance of the society occasions, and to reduce to mere formalities, to be put up with because they have been recurring for many years. The literary society is thus in danger of being shorn of its influence on even its social side.

Now in considering the whole question of the literary society in both school and college we shall have to keep before us the influences which we have but briefly pointed out—changed social ideals impatient and distrustful of the mere orator, increased college requirements in respect to both work and time, the introduction of new methods of instruction and new aims of work, the changed type of college pro-

fessor with his example and attitude toward what the literary society stands for, student ideals of scholarship and athletics, and fresh and more varied social interests. With these before us, the first question to be asked is: Holding to the aims and methods that once ruled the societies, do we desire to make the effort to restore them as they were? The second question is: Recognizing the literary society as essential, or at least a valuable part of college life, do we desire to keep it, but modified to suit the changed conditions? In answer to the first question it is my opinion that the societies can never be restored to the position they once held in college life. The conditions already discussed are simply too strong for that. Indeed, we can well spare the college orator or debater of the older type, even if it were possible to keep him alive. It is true that now and then when we hear him he is interesting as a survival of old things. But he has had his day, and a glorious one it was, too, while it lasted. New times, however, call for other things, and new conditions force the college into line. It is with the second question, therefore, that we have to deal; a question which affirms that the college literary society is a good thing and ought to be preserved and directed toward bringing about the results of which it is capable under present conditions.

It is a wholesome sign to start with, that one can easily detect a reaction away from the disfavor into which the literary societies have fallen, in some quarters any way, and a strong feeling gathering that they are really worth while. To train young men in simple, straightforward, natural, effective public speaking, to furnish a field for the practice of the rules governing deliberative bodies, to offer opportunity for a more or less extemporaneous discussion of current matters of sociology, politics, commerce, literature, and science, however crude the discussion may be, may lead to acquirements not to be despised in the preparation of men who are to take their places as citizens in a democracy like ours. Indeed, all will agree that it is absolutely indispensable that at least a few shall be so trained. If the college is to inform

men in the larger matters of human interest, give the right perspective to their judgments, and train them to think clearly and sanely, it ought also to do all it can to get these things properly expressed in both written and spoken utterance. Even the trained thinker and the man of wide and sure knowledge may be so far hampered in the mere matter of expression as to bungle his thinking and darken his knowledge. It is highly important, therefore, that we should cultivate and foster whatever tends to make reasoned thought and enlightened knowledge effective in the free air of a democracy in which there are so many voices that deafen the reason and eclipse the light. This is the utilitarian view of the possible use of the literary society, and leaves out of all consideration those mere graces of public speech that used to make them things greatly desired for the delight they gave.

But apart from this outlook into that practical life for which the college professes to be getting men ready, we should further see, in considering the mission and use of the literary society, the need of some one element that will unify, if possible, on an intellectual and strictly academic basis all the varied and manifold interests of college life. Now I should not underrate or belittle the very important use of football and baseball clubs in fusing the scattered interests of a college campus into one overwhelming sentiment that we describe in the rather indefinite phrase "college spirit." This is more than a mere sentimentality that finds expression in hideous yells and gives hoarse, husky answers in the class room after all games. Poor indeed is that college that has not this spirit, and I am almost willing to shut my eyes to the excesses of the noisy strenuosity of the athletic mood if it bring into the campus life a warm, vital sense of college unity and bind all the men together in a close bond of student fellowship. It is certain, too, that no other single influence can be quite so strong as athletics to bring this about, at least so long as college students are what they are. But I should earnestly desire to add to the unifying forces of the community life other interests which, if they

be of a milder sort, are yet intellectual and academic. The college rests, as commonplace as it is to say it, fundamentally on things of the mind, and brawn should not absorb the enthusiasm of the students to the exclusion of brain. Now in the possibilities of the literary societies one can see the only means whereby a strong sense of student unity may be established on a basis of intellectual effort and excellence.

The first step in this direction is to be taken in the effort to arouse and maintain a vital interest in these societies. We certainly must get over any cold and languid attitude toward them, and insist that they are not merely for the limited few who happen to have a taste for that sort of work just as there are those who have special aptitudes for chemistry or history or mathematics, but are for all students. If the notion is to get current that the literary society is to be for a small group of men with special aptitudes and uncommon skill in speaking or debate, we shall greatly narrow its aim and use. If it is to be no more than this, it is hardly worth the effort to keep it alive. Under such a conception it either languishes or else it becomes a limited literary club, in which a few chosen spirits may air their notions of things in general, and exploit themselves in public positions which have long since lost the distinction attaching to them. To arouse a general interest rests largely with the authorities of an institution. It is possible for a college faculty both collectively and individually so to express themselves with reference to their attitude to, and their estimate of, the value of society work as to awaken student appreciation and activity. One thing is certain, however: anything like a feeble support on the part of the authorities of an institution is, under present conditions, bound to react to the detriment of the societies.

But we should go even farther than giving a hearty general approbation to what the societies stand for and encouraging to the full, in a general way, what they are trying to do. It is my judgment that all students should be required to join one of the literary societies at least during one year of their college course. This at first may seem a

hardship and a placing of undue emphasis upon their importance in college life. But when we consider both their absolute value and their possible social use in unifying the college community upon an intellectual basis, I believe it worth the doing. To do this, moreover, is at once to show in a tangible way the high value set upon literary society work. A student may elect this or that course of study, but he must elect the work of the society. Moreover, in this way, as I have already said, the entire student body may possibly be bound together in academic fellowship, and all departments meet upon a common ground. A unifying process, a thing greatly to be desired under present collegiate conditions, when the student community is broken into small groups, is thus going on.

Whether or not we thus commit the entire student body to membership in the literary societies, they are such important interests that there should be regular and frequent visitation on the part of the faculties. In this way, by suggestive addresses not only upon the special concerns of literary society work but also upon general subjects of larger public interest, members of the faculty would be recognizing the students in their collective society relationships, and would be thus committing themselves to a share in those things the students are trying to do through the societies. But the faculty should do more than this. There ought to be in every college a standing faculty committee whose duty it should be to keep itself close to the societies, and without needless interference help in directing them to the best results and shaping their aims in accordance with the best ideals. It is little short of suicidal to leave so important an interest wholly to the management of rather immature young men. It is no wonder that at times they so bungle the whole matter and bring the societies to such ignoble uses that we are willing to abolish them out and out as a waste of time and a mangling and perversion of opportunities.

If cheap political methods, drawn from practical politics with which young men in the South are all too familiar; if noisy mouthing and empty vaporizing under the name of

speech-making; the absence of earnest, intelligent effort and serious preparation; the facile, fluent readiness to handle grave, important questions with a superficial flippancy, quibbling with fact and principle that train the dodger and the shallow casuist—if these things all too frequently mark literary society work we have to blame, to no small degree, the let-alone policy of college faculties. We have been rather prone to believe that the day of the literary society was past and that its real usefulness was at an end; that it was an ancient survival of an old formality clinging with some other old things to college life. We have been so busy reconstructing courses of study and readjusting methods of instruction that we have perhaps neglected one other important interest that needed reconstruction and a fresh adaptation to meet changed conditions. This faculty committee therefore has a work to do in getting literary societies to a point where they can do the things of which they are really capable. And this work is worth the doing; it lies along the line of general and special consultation, choice of themes, literary references, advice, suggestion, and direction in all that concerns literary society efficiency.

I believe, too, that each member of the faculty can also take his share in making the literary society seem worth while in yet another way. Each should see to it that at least now and then his department is in some way represented upon the floor of the society. Under present conditions, due to election and divided courses of study, it is possible for no inconsiderable body of students to know absolutely nothing of special departments outside the range of their own line of study. To this class of students the college is really narrowed to the small field in which they may be engaged. To offset this, it is possible for each professor to choose a capable man, and direct him to the treatment of certain phases of his own department susceptible to popular appeal. He would not only thus be opening his own specialty to the student body (in a small, imperfect way, to be sure), but he would also be helping to broaden their view of the larger

work the college is trying to do. His service would therefore be a twofold one, while at the same time he would be emphasizing his own interest in the work of the society.

In particular, the English department should be closely related to the work of the literary society. No course in English should be considered complete without offering special work in written speeches and debate, and reference should always be had to the practical application of the work to the purposes and needs of the societies. In this way the character of the speaking, writing, and debating could possibly be shaped in accordance with the best ideals, and relieved of the futile, inane, vicious rhetoric that characterizes so much the so-called "efforts" of college students. I believe, too, it would be possible for "credit" to be allowed by a department for work done in the societies under its direction and approval. Thus due and proper emphasis could be laid upon the importance of the work a student does for his society, and a higher quality of achievement could be reached.

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